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# Stuff of boundaries? Kyrgyz–Russian marriages and the actualization of ethnic difference

Mathijs Pelkmans and Damira Umetbaeva

**Abstract** What are ethnic boundaries made of? How do people come to experience such boundaries? Notwithstanding the formidable analytic attention to the role and effects of boundary drawing in social life, such questions are rarely asked. We look at the apparently stable boundary between Russians and Kyrgyz villagers in the Issyk-Kul region to trace how its dimensions were naturalized through settler colonialism, Soviet modernization, and post-socialist upheaval. But even if naturalized, the boundary behaves as a “presence absence” whose relevance fluctuates and whose momentary features remain unpredictable, as we demonstrate by focusing on transgressive mixed marriages between Russian and Kyrgyz villagers.

## 1. Introduction

Marina showed us her family album as we were enjoying a late-night cup of tea on her porch in July 2015.<sup>1</sup> The pictures showed Marina and her husband Azat looking smart at birthdays, weddings, and the occasional outdoor activity. “We were so happy,” Marina commented, “I got on with all his relatives, we were like one happy family. My mother-in-law, she absolutely loved me; she taught me all the Kyrgyz

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<sup>1</sup> The ethnographic data contained in this article were collected through a combined four months of fieldwork in the villages of Grigorievka and Mikhailova, both located in Issyk Kul province in north-eastern Kyrgyzstan, in 2015 and 2016. The project was purposely designed as a joint effort, allowing us to study the topic of mixed marriages from different ethnic and gendered positionalities. In this article we have replaced the names of our interlocutors with pseudonyms that reflect their social, cultural, and generational background.

customs.” We were interrupted by her son Timur, eleven years old, who had spent the past hour and a half looking up facts about London in an encyclopedia and wanted to have them confirmed. After he went off to bed Marina commented: “he is *so* into books, we call him our ‘scholar’ (*uchennyi*). They say this about *metis* [people of mixed descent], don’t they, that they often are very intelligent.”<sup>2</sup> We proceeded to discuss other typical characteristics of *metis*, including that they are considered particularly beautiful, something that Marina also saw confirmed in her own son. Not that he was always having it easy at school, and in fact he did not have many friends. According to Marina this was due to Timur being different from both the Russian and the Kyrgyz children in his group. “When you look at him, it’s immediately clear that he is neither fish nor fowl. And you know how kids are,” she added in a slightly downcast voice. The conversation returned to Marina and Azat’s marriage: “We were together for more than ten years. But now? It is all over. His brothers and sisters don’t even greet me anymore when I pass their house.” This was particularly awkward because they were all living on the same street. Marina had briefly paused, but then firmly concluded the conversation: “Only seven months have passed [after Azat died], and it is as if nothing ever existed! If they don’t want to deal with me—fine! —but it is the boy that I feel sorry about.”

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This straightforward story of a mixed marriage and its messy afterlife can be seen as emblematic of interethnic relations between Kyrgyz and Russians in rural settings.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Russian and in Kyrgyz the word *metis*, as in English, refers to a person of mixed descent or to a hybrid when applied to non-humans. It is related to the French *métis* and the Spanish *mestizo*.

<sup>3</sup> We use these ethno-national labels as emic terms, following local definitions that are based on bureaucratic logic and usually follow the paternal line.

Mixed marriages between Russians and Kyrgyz are rare, but they do exist. While such marriages potentially bridge the intercommunal divide, they tend to release tensions that push towards a remarking of the boundary. In fact, the story could be interpreted as a literal illustration of Barth's classic statement that "boundaries persist despite a flow across them" (1969: 9). And actually, the persistence of the boundary in this case is wholly unsurprising given that the differences between Russians and Kyrgyz are hardly ever questioned by anyone. The differences are described as obvious by the involved: Russians are Orthodox Christians and are Europeans while Kyrgyz are Muslims and are Asians; they have different languages, family structures, forms of hospitality, and codes of conduct. Moreover, these differences are seen to have always existed, predating the time that Kyrgyz and Russians started to interact regularly in what is now Kyrgyzstan's Issyk-Kul province.<sup>4</sup>

It may not be obvious why this apparently stable boundary would be a good starting point to revisit the topic of ethnic boundaries. As mentioned, all that we seem to be ending up with, at first sight, is confirmation of the old if important Barthian insight that groups are produced through boundary work, one that has since become a truism. But actually this underscores the rationale of our approach. It appears to us that while much anthropological attention has been paid to the effects of boundary drawing (bordering), the boundaries themselves are rarely scrutinized. And ironically this is linked to Barth's famous and productive insistence to focus on "the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses" (1969: 15).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Issyk-Kul province, named after the 181-kilometre-long Issyk-Kul Lake that dominates the region, is in the north-east of Kyrgyzstan and borders on Kazakhstan to the north and China to the east.

<sup>5</sup> Our own approach is clearly influenced by this famous statement of Barth, as well as by Abbott's later provocative phrasing that "we should not look for boundaries of things, but things of boundaries" (2001: 261). Similar to these approaches we start with processes of binding and bounding instead of the

Although rightly seen as a milestone in the move from an essentialist to a constructionist approach in anthropology (Vermeulen and Govers 1994; Wimmer 2008), Barth has had remarkably little to say about the “stuff” that boundaries are made of. This is less contradictory than it sounds. Basically, what Barth is saying is that rather than the cultural stuff explaining sameness and difference, it is the boundary that explains (differences between) the cultural stuff. In this shift the boundary becomes the *explanans* (that which explains) rather than the *explanandum* (that which needs to be explained). Resultantly, the boundary as such has often ended up being taken for granted.<sup>6</sup> Our approach is to collapse the old Barthian insight onto itself. If Barth argued that the analyst’s attention needed to shift from the essentialist “cultural stuff” to the organizing “ethnic boundary,” we suggest that redirecting *some* of the attention to the “stuff” that makes up boundaries produces new insight in the flows and blockages that constitute the always patchy sociocultural fabric. For the purposes of scrutinizing what boundaries are made of, and for studying how actors experience and engage the “stuff of boundaries” , a solid looking boundary is a convenient starting point.

It would be unfair to ignore Barth’s later efforts to develop a multivalent understanding of boundaries. In fact, three decades after having produced his seminal work, Barth distinguished between three interrelated aspects: “1. Literally, boundaries divide territories ‘on the ground’; 2. More abstractly, they set limits that mark social

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categories (cultural, ethnic, national, or other) upon which these processes acts; but we differ in that we focus on how the boundaries themselves are experienced and constituted.

<sup>6</sup> Without denying the value of works that describe the “multidimensional” and “liminal” qualities of boundaries (e.g. Akkerman and Bakker 2011; Lamont and Molnar 2002), or that differentiate between stable and unstable boundaries and tease out the factors that account for variation (Wimmer 2008; 2013), we stand by our claim that this provides little insight in the experiential realities of boundaries.

groups off from each other; 3. And finally, they provide a template for that which separates distinct categories of the mind” (2000: 17). These aspects can readily be applied to the topic at hand. The territorial aspect can be taken to refer to the configurations of social life—related to residential patterns, work and leisure activities, and networks of friends and relatives—that cluster Kyrgyz and Russians differently and separately. The second aspect concerns the “limits” that regulate engagement, and according to which economic and neighborly interactions between Kyrgyz and Russians in public contexts are valued neutrally, while intermarriages are deemed problematic. Finally, boundary refers to the “categories of the mind” that prompt different and often opposing connotations; here, the ethnic labels Russian and Kyrgyz are paired with long lists of nouns—food, dress, music, skills, what have you—that together produce a template of difference between Russians and Kyrgyz.

And yet, even though it is useful to tease out these cognitive, social, and spatial dimensions, the emphasis continues to be on the effects of boundaries rather than on the boundaries themselves. The boundary itself remains elusive. Reflecting on this elusiveness may provide further insight into why the “stuff of boundaries” has received insufficient analytic attention. As Barth did in the previous paragraph, the Oxford English Dictionary uses the notion of “limit” in its definition of boundary: “boundary, *n.* 1. that which serves to indicate the bounds or limits of anything whether material or immaterial; also the limit itself.” This wording is helpful because it highlights that the boundary constitutes both a *presence* (as the indicator of the limit) and an *absence* (as the limit itself). In other words, we are talking about boundaries as “lines” and as “gaps,” qualities that are complexly interrelated.

It is here that we can productively return to Marina’s story, and take serious her memories of “one happy family” and her astonishment that suddenly it was “all

over.” Marina’s experiences with an alternately dissipating and emerging boundary suggested a non-totalizing social field in which her journey interacted with the “intensities” and “affects” of her milieu to produce a situationally contingent “sense of boundary.”<sup>7</sup> While in Marina’s story the absence and presence of the boundary was sequentially arranged, Callon and Law’s reminder that “presence can be absence, and the absent present” (2004: 3) is pertinent to this boundary as well. Experientially, the boundary recedes into the background when naturalized, while taking front stage when challenged.

In short, while the term “boundary” is generally used to invoke precision and linearity, its experiential properties are elusive. Thinking of groups and boundaries, we suggest that our analytical move resembles Brubaker’s (2004) important reminder that one should not assume the existence of “groups” but rather analyze the fluctuating intensities of “groupness.” Arguing that boundaries should likewise be questioned, we are similarly interested in fluctuating intensities, that is, in how the clarity and fuzziness, the rigidity and porosity of boundaries change over time. The issue is that boundaries are complex and unstable constructs, and can therefore not be represented in straightforward ways without doing violation to their “emergent qualities.”<sup>8</sup> That is, boundaries attain some of their features only in the course of

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase “sense of boundary” is a liberal reference to Sarah Green’s (2012) phrase “sense of border” which she uses to capture the way borders are experienced. While she focuses on territorial borders and describes long-term processes, we use “sense of boundary” to describe how sensory experiences of boundaries are situationally contingent.

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze uses the term “emergence” together with “actualization” and “becoming” to underscore the uncertainty of process. He uses becoming in subject-oriented passages (becoming animal, etc.) and actualization and emergence in relation to essences and phenomena (see 2004: 233-234, 306-307).

human action and interaction.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, by analyzing the making and unmaking of boundaries we also aim to identify the cognitive, social, and affective “stuff of boundaries.” We understand boundaries to have ontological, epistemic, and existential attributes, while emphasizing that these attributes slip in and out of focus, and are transformed even while they are reproduced over time.

The “stable” boundary between Russians and Kyrgyz serves as a foil against which to theorize emergence, with the aim to demonstrate that boundaries do not only have real effects but attain their features through social and cognitive engagement. To illustrate these emergent qualities, we focus in section three on acts of engagement that are particularly consequential on a personal and interpersonal level: mixed marriages between Kyrgyz and Russians. Because these marriages are transgressive, they intensify a “sense of boundary” among the involved, while sparking societal responses aimed at remarking the boundary. We identified several tendencies in the social trajectories of the marriages as “boundary objects” (Akkerman and Bakker 2003). A first tendency was to *marginalize* the couple, a restorative act which normatively affirmed the boundary; a second tendency was to *encapsulate* one of the marriage partners into the other side, something which restored the social fabric. But while the couples often went along with these restorative tendencies they sometimes rejected the underlying ethnic logic, setting the stage for a *reconfiguration* of the social fabric. Following the trajectories of these mixed marriages thus provides deeper insight into how boundaries are both reproduced and transformed. Moreover, it shows the importance of paying attention to how boundaries are experienced, a topic we

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<sup>9</sup> In a study of the Spanish–Moroccan frontier, Driessen shows how it is in ritual and ceremony that features of ethnic boundaries become tangible (1992). Inspired by his approach, we look at how elements of the boundary emerge in the life trajectories of villagers.



highlight specifically towards the end of this article. First, however, we need to explore how this “stable” boundary came into being, which we do by documenting the historical process through which differences between Russians and Kyrgyz came to be naturalized, and these categories were asymmetrically infused with power (cf. Stoler 2002).

## **2. Naturalized Differences and Contested Hierarchies**

Nuriza, an unmarried Kyrgyz woman of twenty years old, found it difficult to comment on Russian men as potential husbands. It was not that the topic made her feel uncomfortable, but rather that she had hardly ever given it thought. When we probed why she couldn’t conceive of a Russian as a potential spouse, her response was telling: “I don’t know.” The not-knowing was significant because it suggested the generally unquestioned nature of the boundary between Kyrgyz and Russians, its absent presence. Still, after some reflection Nuriza mentioned: “Well, I think, you know, with them, it’s that they have a different outlook on life. They can, for example, leave their family. For us it is all about responsibility, but they do not have it [a sense of responsibility] like that. They can just leave.” And she added: “The thing is that their traditions are simpler than with us Kyrgyz.”

Nuriza had plenty of experience with Russians. She had lived her entire life in Mikhailovka, one of the ten to fifteen so-called “Russian villages” in Issyk-Kul province, which were thus named because they had been founded by Russian settlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and used to have a majority

“Russian” population (the label included Ukrainians) until the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> In Soviet times Mikhailovka had the reputation of being an advanced and modern village, a reputation that was based on its early electrification and asphalted village roads, its thriving collective farm with impressive technical support unit, and its vicinity to the provincial capital of Karakol. This modern reputation was shared with most other Russian villages in the region, and was contrasted with the more peripheral and “backward” Kyrgyz villages that specialized in animal husbandry.

Although many Russians had migrated to Russia after 1991, Mikhailovka still had a significant Russian minority of roughly 25 percent when Nuriza attended school. She had followed the Russian-language curriculum, with classes evenly split between Russian and Kyrgyz pupils and having mostly Russian teachers. Throughout her school years she had interacted with her Russian classmates, several of whom she had called her friends. The frequency of interaction had dropped since graduation, but Nuriza kept herself updated about their lives. Like many villagers, she ascribed to the view that the local Kyrgyz had more in common with local Russians than with Kyrgyz from other regions or from more peripheral villages in Issyk-Kul region.<sup>11</sup>

And yet, when we asked about interethnic romances, Nuriza knew of only one such case. At the time, this relationship—between a Kyrgyz boy and a Russian girl—

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<sup>10</sup> Fieldwork was carried out in Mikhailovka and Grigorievka, both of which had been established in the early twentieth century, and up until 1991 had a predominantly Russian population of respectively around 4,500 and 6,000 inhabitants.

<sup>11</sup> Schröder (2017) observes a similar configuration in Kyrgyzstan’s capital Bishkek, where Russians and urbanized Kyrgyz clustered together to distinguish themselves from Kyrgyz migrants arriving from more rural or peripheral origins and were seen as lacking in culture. Also similar to Schröder’s urban case is that alliances between Kyrgyz and Russians rarely “go beyond the status of being acquaintances” (2010: 454).

had looked like a normal friendship between schoolmates, but it later turned out to have been a romantic affair. The exceptionality of such relationships was also conveyed when Nuriza answered a question about Russian boys being interested in Kyrgyz girls: “Whether or not they looked at us [romantically], they probably thought it better to be just friends.”<sup>12</sup> What stood out from this discussion was the extent to which the boundary between Kyrgyz and Russians was presented as a natural one, a fact of life implicit in the villagers’ way of being.

These naturalizations of difference can be understood as the sediments of what Strathern (1988) calls “domaining,” the historical process by which labels are infused with coherence, meaning, and power.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, the patterns of engagement between Kyrgyz and Russians are embedded in a wider historical context, a long conversation that started in the nineteenth century, in which the relative positions of Kyrgyz and Russians changed over time. It will be useful to see how elements of the boundary came to be arranged and how ideas about the other developed.<sup>14</sup> We do this by providing in this section an outline of the historical conversation between Russians and Kyrgyz around Lake Issyk-Kul, to then explore the nature of everyday interactions between Russians and Kyrgyz, and return to the topic of mixed marriages.

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<sup>12</sup> The taboo was particularly strong for relationships between Kyrgyz women and Russian men, and less stringent for Kyrgyz men and Russian women, especially after a first marriage had dissolved.

<sup>13</sup> Discussing similar issues, while linking them explicitly to political processes, Stoler talks about the “micro-ecologies of matter and mind” that are the sediments or debris of empire (2008: 194).

<sup>14</sup> This brings to mind Sarah Green’s discussion of lines, traces, and tidemarks (2018: 71), which inserts a temporal dimension to discussions of bordering, and draws attention to the “traces of previous efforts at marking a separation.”

The Issyk-Kul region was incorporated into the expanding Russian Empire in the 1850s. Like in most of its new territories in Central Asia the tsarist administration had initially refrained from interfering in local affairs, and hence the reaction of the indigenous Kyrgyz population had been slight (Carrère d'Encausse 1994: 151-52). However, subsequent waves of Russian migration to Central Asia in the period 1892 to 1916 radically upset this relative tranquility. Due to its fertile soils, especially at its eastern extremity, the Issyk-Kul region attracted a large portion of this immigration.<sup>15</sup> The continuing influx of Russian settlers and their claims on land used by Kyrgyz pastoralists as winter pastures fueled intercommunal tension and resentment (Brower 1996: 53; Morrison 2015: 6). In this context, a decree by the tsarist government in June 1916 that required Kyrgyz men to work as laborers behind the front lines in the war with Germany proved explosive. Groups of Kyrgyz revolted against the Russian presence, an uprising that quickly turned into a massacre of Russian settlers, killing over 2,000 in the Issyk-Kul region alone.<sup>16</sup> The Russian response, in the form of self-armed militias and army reinforcements, was even more deadly, with killed Kyrgyz surpassing “by far the Russian casualties” (Brower 1996: 43-44; Morrison 2015: 18). In anticipation of retribution the vast majority of Kyrgyz fled across the mountains to China, an exodus that took tremendous human toll, and from which most survivors returned only after the Bolsheviks had established control in the early 1920s.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> By 1916 the Issyk Kul basin counted 30,000 (mostly Slavic) settlers among 150,000 Kyrgyz, a proportion that in Turkestan was only surpassed by the Chui valley (Brower 1996: 51).

<sup>16</sup> The revolt spread across a much larger territory in what is now Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, but was particularly intense in the Issyk Kul region (Brower 1996: 51).

<sup>17</sup> The revolt and exodus (or *ürkün*) was largely omitted in Soviet historiography, but has received new attention since Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991 (see Umetbaeva 2015; Chokobaeva 2016).

These horrific events were rooted in the economic tensions between Russian settlers and Kyrgyz pastoralists, who were locked into a colonial system that was prejudiced against pastoral nomadism, seeing it as a backward mode of existence that was destined to give way to settled agriculture. Importantly, these tensions resonated with—and intensified—ideas of cultural difference between the settlers and the pastoralists. Morrison, for example, mentions that settlers never referred “to the Kyrgyz as anything other than dogs” (2015: 14), and Brower cites a Russian study into the causes of the 1916 massacre which reported that “the new settlers look upon the Kyrgyz as animals and treat them accordingly” (1996: 49). The Kyrgyz perspective is hardly documented, but anecdotal evidence suggests that they held equally dim views of Russian settlers, seeing them as barbarians with whom contact was best avoided (Brower 2003: 139; Pelkmans 2017: 49). The events of 1916 and continuing animosities in the years thereafter only deepened the divide between Kyrgyz and Russians.

The Russian Revolution bolstered the position of Central Asia’s native population. The Bolsheviks represented an anti-colonial force that promised to liberate the suppressed masses. Importantly, their centrist form of government came to be based on an ethno-territorial principle, of which the Kyrgyz Socialist Soviet Republic (SSR) became one of the components.<sup>18</sup> The principle recognized and secured the position of titular nations, meaning that the development of the Kyrgyz

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<sup>18</sup> Kyrgyzstan first became an administrative unit in 1924 as the Kara Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast, which then was renamed Kyrgyz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic in 1926, and became a full-fledged Socialist Soviet Republic in 1936.

SSR was linked to the advancement of the Kyrgyz nation.<sup>19</sup> Another major change was the collectivization of agriculture, a key mechanism by which Soviet leadership aimed to break the vestiges of the past, develop its rural areas and modernize agriculture. But while collectivization transformed rural life in many ways, it ended up institutionalizing some of the differences and inequalities between Russians and Kyrgyz. The Bolsheviks inherited from their tsarist predecessors a disdain for nomadism, which was married to the high modernist desire of controlling population movement and rationalizing land use. As Kassymbekova and Teichmann (2012: 163) put it, “Europe remained the Bolsheviks’ blueprint for progress and development,” a blueprint that reinstated inequalities between Russians and Kyrgyz by prioritizing sedentary agriculture over pastoralism (see also Loring 2014: 83).

The division of labor between collective farms around Lake Issyk Kul followed ethnic lines, which in itself was unsurprising because these collectives were established on the basis of preexisting settlement patterns (see Collins 2006: 86). Kyrgyz collective farms specialized in wool and meat production, Russian ones focused on crop cultivation. And when collective farms were fused into larger units and as a result became more ethnically mixed, as happened in Grigorievka and Mikhailovka after 1950, the division of labor continued to be based on ideas of cultural competency. The shepherds, veterinarians, and most milkmaids were Kyrgyz, while Russians worked in the field and held jobs as technicians and in the farm administration.<sup>20</sup> Outside the collective farm Russians tended to work in technical and

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<sup>19</sup> The new administrative format required fixed ethno-national labels. This was a contentious process when group affiliation rested on tribal, occupational, or residential patterns rather than “ethnicity” (e.g. Hirsch 2005), but such contentions did not concern the distinction between “Kyrgyz” and “Russians.”

<sup>20</sup> A local publication on Grigorievka illustrate this ethnic division of labour. Its 1970s pictures of “cattle-breeders” show only Kyrgyz, and those of “toilers” only Russians (Sereda et al 2009: 41, 83).

educational, as well as in administrative positions. The vast majority of the Kyrgyz were employed in the collective farm, but they were also relatively well represented in the police force, and increasingly so in service jobs (see also Loring 2014: 96, 99).

Although these asymmetric patterns somewhat varied across the region and fluctuated with time, they persisted through the Soviet period and affected many domains of social life. The inequalities were enhanced by the dominance of the Russian language in official settings and which was hence aspired to by upwardly mobile Kyrgyz. In Russian villages, most self-styled modern Kyrgyz families would endeavor to furnish their homes European style, and they would dress and cook in ways that emulated an image of modernity that unavoidably had Russian connotations. By contrast, Russians would never speak Kyrgyz in public, even if some were able to understand Kyrgyz from years of exposure. Nor would they consider eating with bare hands while seated on felt carpets on the floor “as the Kyrgyz do,” a practice that came to be seen as primitive by many local Kyrgyz as well.

Ever since the 1930s, the Soviet state had displayed a favorable attitude towards intermarriage. It was seen as an indicator that nationalities were drawing together (Dunn and Dunn 1973), and associated “with the arrival of modernity in ‘backward’ areas” (Edgar 2007: 587). In Central Asia, marital bonds between Russian women and native men especially (the reverse rarely occurred) were viewed positively because it was expected that a Russian wife would have a civilizing effect on the family, and spearhead change in native communities (ibid., 589). Thus, while presented in terms of internationalism, the bias towards “modernity” also meant a bias towards things Russian and “European.” But whereas marriages between Russians and Kyrgyz became somewhat more common in urban settings, they continued to be

the exception in rural contexts.<sup>21</sup> In fact, we were unable to locate a single Russian – Kyrgyz intermarriage in either Grigorievka or Mikhailovka that was contracted before the 1990s.

By the late 1980s the largely rural Issyk-Kul region had a population of 360,000 of whom 40 per cent or 150,000 were classified as Russian and 55 per cent as Kyrgyz. These proportions changed radically after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. By 1999, the region had 413,000 inhabitants, of whom only 13 per cent or 53,000 were classified as Russian, with an additional 0.6 per cent or 3,000 as Ukrainian (Burzhubaeva et al 2001: 528). The crumbling of the welfare state and massive unemployment had produced uncertainties for the population at large. But for Russian inhabitants, these difficulties were compounded by anxiety about their position in an independent Kyrgyzstan. While previously Russians had felt secure and indeed superior to “Asians” in the Russian-dominated Soviet Empire, they had been transformed into an ethnic minority overnight.

In her book *Children of Empire*, Kosmarskaya (2006) documents the sense of confusion, insecurity and fear that pervaded the Russian minority in the 1990s. Her respondents—many of whom lived in Grigorievka—mentioned the constant rumors of violence, of people being robbed and killed. And although most had not personally experienced such acts of violence, they had all feared to end up as the last Russians left behind in Kyrgyzstan, having missed the opportunity to leave. The largest wave of Russian emigration occurred in the early 1990s, but the Russian community has

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<sup>21</sup> Between 1959 and 1979 the percentages of ethnically mixed families in the Kyrgyz SSR rose from 18.1 % to 23.1 % in urban contexts, and from 5.5 to 5.9 % in rural contexts (Gorenburg 2016: 147). These percentages cannot be applied directly to Kyrgyz – Russian marriages, because most of these documented mixed families consisted of people considered to be close, such as Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, or Russians and Ukrainians (see also Edgar 2007: 586-88).



continued to shrink since then. Important factors here are the ongoing economic crisis and the ethnicization of political life and public service, which reduced opportunities for Russians (Peyrouse 2008: 13). Most “Russian villages” still have a significant Russian minority, but their proportion does not exceed 30 per cent in any of them.

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Official Soviet discourse had always emphasized the importance of cooperation between nations in the building of socialism in each of its Republics, a trope that resonated with the ideals of “modernity” in Russian villages. Consider the following passage from a locally produced historiography of Grigorievka:

We used to live in friendship, as one large international family: Russians, Kyrgyz, Balkars, Uighurs, Kazakhs, Belarusians, and Ukrainians.<sup>22</sup> With the entire village, we achieved victory in socialist labor. Many villagers wore on their chests with pride the medals Hero of Socialist Labor, the Order of Lenin, the Order of the Red Banner of Labor, and the Order of the Badge of Honor (Sereda et al 2009: 7, translated).

As the excerpt suggests, the Soviet leitmotif of internationalism continued to find its way into popular representations of village life long after the demise of the USSR. And indeed, when inhabitants of Grigorievka and Mikhailovka talk to outsiders, they often say that the Kyrgyz, Russians, and others in their village live in harmony; or they will repeat the popular saying: “there are no bad nations, there only are bad

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<sup>22</sup> This enumeration should not be read to mean that Grigorievka was ethnically highly diverse; in fact Russians and Kyrgyz together made up over 95% of the population. Rather the enumeration should be seen as a testimony to the Soviet *ideal* of internationalism.

people.” In cross-ethnic conversations it is common that stories are exchanged about how local Russians are sometimes teasingly called “Kyrgyz” when in Russia, and how Kyrgyz who travel to Uzbekistan (or even other parts of Kyrgyzstan) tend to feel more at home among the “cultured” and “civilized” Russians in their village. This discourse of internationalism is an attractive one that most established villagers are inclined to keep up. It projects an image that facilitates communication between Kyrgyz and Russians—as neighbors, as buyers and sellers in the market, and as colleagues. A useful way to describe such communication is “everyday diplomacy” (Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado, and Henig, 2016) in the sense that interactions are generally civil, but also diplomatic in the sense that civility is dependent on leaving much unspoken.

It should thus not be assumed that relations between Kyrgyz and Russians are unproblematic or free of tension. The discourse of internationalism is partly a façade, as revealed by slips of the tongue, such as when Russians talk dismissively about “when the Kyrgyz came down from the mountains” or when Kyrgyz shake their head while referring to elderly Russians who are seen as having been abandoned by their children now living in Russia. Kyrgyz and Russians differ in how they integrate negative and positive elements in their depictions of each other. Russian teachers, nurses, and book-keepers repeatedly mentioned “we taught them civilization,” which they suggested was appreciated by the Kyrgyz. This superior attitude was easily maintained during Soviet times, when Russianness represented the culture of Empire, associated with power and civilization, and command of the Russian language was a prerequisite for career advancement (see also Reeves 2014: 114). To be urban and civilized meant speaking Russian and adopting clothing styles and eating preferences that were seen as modern, Soviet, European, and Russian by default.

Not that Kyrgyz ever completely accepted this view of Russian superiority. They had always talked about Russians as people without traditions, without respect for family, and hence as morally questionable. Russians were also said to have an unpleasant smell and to be untidy, which was sometimes linked to their habit of keeping pets in the home. With Kyrgyz independence, and the concomitant emphasis on “national culture,” such negative depictions became more explicit. Thus, while the contributions of notable Russians to village institutions were still acknowledged, this was often followed by the suggestion that, unfortunately, “the good Russians have all left.” Elderly Russians were looked upon with pity for having been abandoned by their children and some Kyrgyz went as far as saying that the remaining younger Russians were all alcoholics.

While everyday interactions between Russians and Kyrgyz tended to be civil and polite, they were framed by recognition of profound differences. And importantly, the structures of power onto which these differences were grafted had shifted. This complex legacy is evident in how the topic of mixed marriages features in conversations. When such marriages were talked about in the abstract they sometimes elicited positive commentary (which revealed a racialized aesthetics). For example, when we asked a group of female Kyrgyz traders in the bazaar, they joked about the potential advantages of Russian brides: mixed Kyrgyz-Russian offspring would allow the Kyrgyz to shed their Mongolian appearance and to look again as their distant ancestors, who in the folktales used to have blond hair and blue eyes. But the other possibility, of Kyrgyz women marrying Russians, was inconceivable even in the abstract. Partly this was because religion and nationality followed the paternal, not maternal line; such a marriage, one of the women said, would have the girl’s family “be doomed to the seventh generation.” When we concretized the idea of mixed

marriages by asking Kyrgyz parents if they would approve if one of their children proposed to marry a Russian, most simply rejected the idea (see also Kosmarskaya 1996: 128).

What we witness here is a complex historical entanglement of “regimes of truth” (Stoler 2002: 2). The colonial and racist perspective of tsarist Russia had been partly overwritten by the Soviet rhetoric of “internationalism” that nevertheless kept intact the idea of Russia as the “older brother,” which in the 1990s was reconfigured into a religiously colored Kyrgyz nationalist discourse. Differences between Kyrgyz and Russians were naturalized even in the face of such significant geopolitical changes; with actors agreeing on their uniqueness and incompatibility. As “everyday diplomacy” this recognition of difference allowed for cooperation in transactional, professional, and neighboring spheres; as (thinly) disguised condescension it kept the other at a distance and set limits to acceptable interaction. Intermarriage challenges these naturalizations of the boundary. Precisely because mixed marriages violate the rules of engagement, they offer an insightful lens on how elements of the boundary emerge, intensify, and reconfigure.

### **3. Patchwork and the Mixing of Marriages**

When asked about mixed marriages, residents of Mikhailovka and Grigorievka tended to answer with “sure, we have many of those,” to then realize that such marriages were actually quite rare.<sup>23</sup> These exceptional marriages illuminate multiple

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<sup>23</sup> We identified six marriages between Russians and Kyrgyz in Mikhailovka and seven in Grigorievka, which amounts to less than one per cent of all marriages. We acknowledge that this does not include people from these villages who entered a mixed marriage but are living elsewhere. In all thirteen instances we reconstructed the genealogies of wife and husband and collected additional information on residence, professional, educational and socio-economic background, and labour histories. In most

dimensions of the ethnic boundary. Mixed marriages violate boundaries by crossing lines of normative behavior, while also potentially tying together two social networks, that is, bridging the gap (or boundary) between them. Conceptualizing boundaries simultaneously as classificatory lines and as gaps in social networks is important for analyzing the complexity of boundaries, including the enabling and disabling aspects of “bordering.” The question that needs answering here is how the “line” and “gap” qualities of boundaries emerge and then interact with these transgressive marital relationships. Moreover, how do the connecting and dividing aspects relate to larger configurations centered on kinship, locality, and religion? By analyzing these mechanisms of bordering and boundary crossing (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 187) we aim to see not only how mixed marriages were stitched into and cut out of the wider social fabric, but also better understand the experiential texture or “stuff” of boundaries.

The selected cases reflect different tendencies in how the complications of mixed marriages were dealt with by the marital couples and their extended families. As mentioned we distinguish between three logics. “Marginalization” refers to the tendency pathologize such marriages and to exclude them from established patterns of interaction. “Encapsulation” refers to the relatively complete and exclusive integration of one marriage partner (usually the bride) into the network of the other. “Reconfiguration” refers to changes in the modes of connectedness, indicating here a shift from ethnically to religiously modulated forms of sociality. These logics of

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instances we managed to interview both husband and wife, often more than once. Of these thirteen marriages we provide elaborate discussions of five in this article, while drawing on the others to provide further contextualization. The relatively small number of cases prevents us, however, from making significant quantitative claims.

encapsulation, marginalization, and reconfiguration are responses to boundary transgression, but although they clearly have restorative aims, in doing so they affect the texture of those boundaries in potentially transformative ways.

### *Marginalization*

As mentioned, when mixed marriages occur, these tend to be between Kyrgyz men and Russian women; marriages between Russian men and Kyrgyz women are unacceptable from a Kyrgyz perspective. In Grigorievka, however, there was one such exceptional couple. Whenever villagers mentioned this marriage they highlighted its unusual and complicated aspects: that Igor was Aigul's senior by thirty years and that Aigul had been destitute because of the alcoholism of her first (and Kyrgyz) husband. Aigul repeated these same points in her first conversation with Damira, in an apparent attempt to legitimize her marriage to a Russian man. Aigul then emphasized that even now she lacked security—for all she knew Igor could walk out on her any day. It came across as a remarkable statement for a 45-year-old woman to express in a first conversation with another Kyrgyz woman about her 75-year-old husband, with whom she had lived for twenty years and shared three children (in the ages of fourteen, twelve, and nine). But the statement corresponded with the widespread idea of irresponsible Russian men, as voiced earlier in this article by Nuriza.

Presented here in bold strokes, the couple's story had started in the immediate post-Soviet years, in 1994, when Igor was a direct colleague of Aigul's abusive first husband. After the situation at home spiraled out of control, and lacking alternatives, Aigul and her two-year-old son moved into the small empty house situated in Igor's courtyard. At the time Igor was still living with his first and Russian wife in the main house, creating what Igor jokingly referred to as an "interesting situation." This

situation lasted until Igor's first wife migrated to Russia to join their adult daughter and her family, after which Aigul moved into the main residence. Not long thereafter Aigul's son died, producing a sense of loss that was further intensified by the refusal of her first husband to attend his own son's funeral.

Relationships with relatives on both sides became strained. On Igor's side, this was only partly attributable to the sensitivities of intermarriage. Rather, his kinship network was already unravelling due to the emigration of numerous relatives, the disintegration of the Russian community more generally, and tensions connected to the complex domestic situation with two women living in the compound. Igor's son had already left the house and was living a five-minute walk away. He was the only direct relative with whom Igor continued to be in regular contact. Relatives on Aigul's side had been dismayed when she moved in with Igor, and they refused meaningful contact for many years. Aigul reflected on these tensions with some bitterness, saying they were "to be expected." Ties had been partly restored in recent years, and the couple had attended some family occasions. Igor mentioned how during one such occasion he had talked with his wife's relatives about his Kyrgyz roots—Igor's grandfather had been Kyrgyz<sup>24</sup>—which reportedly had facilitated the rapprochement.

Aigul and Igor's marital union was unusual in many ways, but several of the described elements surfaced in other mixed marriages. As was the case here, most mixed marriages were contracted between partners who had previously been married. Clearly, the objections of parents and other relatives were less intense and carried less

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<sup>24</sup> According to the story, Igor's father was born around 1900 as the child of a Russian mother and a Kyrgyz father, and although mother and child lived in the Russian community, this heritage was said to have saved their lives during the 1916 intercommunal violence.

weight with second marriages.<sup>25</sup> What is more, mixed couples tended to be from incomplete families or be partial outsiders to their own communal circles. This was true for Igor whose relatives had already moved to Russia, as well as for Aigul who felt abandoned by her relatives when her first marriage broke down. The act of intermarriage produced a backlash that eroded social networks, with mixed couples being less visited and invited by relatives, or excluded from reciprocity networks. The straining or even severance of relationships with relatives and the negative portrayal of the marriage marginalized this particular couple, which together with the adoption of stigma by Aigul powerfully reproduced the ethnic boundary.

### *Encapsulation*

Not knowing exactly where Lena lived, we asked a group of Kyrgyz neighborhood kids in which house the “Russian daughter-in-law” (*orus kelin*) was living. They had no idea who we were talking about. The reason was not that the kids did not know her, but that Lena did not fit the label “Russian,” as we realized after having located the household. Lena welcomed us to her small house on the edge of the village, where she and husband Jenish had been living for a couple of years with their three young children. Chickens ran across the grassy courtyard, which was hemmed in by stables for their two cows. Lena’s blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin certainly made her look Russian, but in most other respects she came across as Kyrgyz. She spoke impeccable Kyrgyz with her children, wore a headscarf as all married Kyrgyz village women do (Russian women wear a headscarf only in old age), and also her way of keeping the house came across as Kyrgyz rather than Russian.

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<sup>25</sup> Cleuziou (2016) similarly finds that in Central Asia second marriages are far less accentuated, and that parents have less of a say in the decision-making process.



We had already been informed that Lena was born on the south side of Lake Issyk-Kul and had been kidnapped by her husband, a fairly common road to marriage among Kyrgyz, but not Russians (see Borbieva 2012; Werner 2009). We asked her to tell us more about her life story:

“From birth I am Russian, but my parents they were alcoholics. I don’t have any feelings for them. They sold everything: the house, the land, and they left me on the street. When I was eleven years old—in the fifth grade—I was taken into the house of a Kyrgyz family. They are the ones who raised me. That is why I don’t smoke, don’t drink. And I did everything. I took care of the sheep, milked the cows. That’s also why my husband kidnapped (*ukral* = stole) me ... I had the reputation of being a good hardworking girl [she laughs with a hint of pride] ... That was five years ago [when she was twenty years old]. My husband didn’t know me; he had only seen my picture on a phone.”

Presenting this story as an example of a mixed marriage is not unproblematic. After all, socially speaking Lena had already become Kyrgyz by the time she was kidnapped. She still maintained occasional contact with her birth-brother living five hours away, but had no contact with her birth-parents. She had thus already become part of Kyrgyz networks, so that the act of marriage did not require her to cross significant social or cultural boundaries. Nevertheless, her Russian origins and physical appearance could not be completely erased. For example, it was because of her Russian origins that another intermarried Russian woman (Marina, who featured in the introduction) made efforts to make Lena feel welcome in Mikhailovka. Indeed,

while the Kyrgyz neighborhood children did not perceive Lena as different, most adults did,<sup>26</sup> and hence the marriage was referred to as a successful mixed marriage.

During one of our conversations, husband Jenish recounted how he had found out about Lena. A cousin had shown him a picture and told him: “She is Russian, but she was raised by a Kyrgyz family.” For Jenish this was important, because “there are many girls, Russian ones, who drink and smoke, but for a Muslim that is not right.” His parents were skeptical when he brought Lena home. “They scolded me: ‘Why a Russian girl!?’” But apparently, they had come to terms with it quickly. Lena had put on the *joluk* (headscarf) after some resistance and had thereby signaled her consent to the marriage. She also adopted Islam— “they did not force me, they just said it was the right thing for a proper marriage” —after which a *moldo* (mullah) carried out the wedding ritual (the *nike* or *nikah*). Lena’s adoptive parents fully participated in the elaborate gift exchanges through which marriages are consolidated and the families become connected: “They gave us a washing machine, kitchenware (*posuda*), and a cow.”<sup>27</sup>

For the first two years of their marriage, the couple had lived with Jenish’s parents. Lena mentioned that her parents-in-law fully accepted her: “they were surprised about how much I knew; that they did not have to teach me everything about how to be a *kelin* (daughter-in-law).” As was the case with Lena, so are all young brides who marry into a Kyrgyz family expected to first live with their in-laws and submit to the authority of the mother-in-law. This is a challenging time even for

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<sup>26</sup> Lena mentioned that strangers invariably “act surprised” when discovering that she is more fluent in Kyrgyz than in Russian.

<sup>27</sup> Elaborate discussions of weddings and gift-giving in Central Asia can be found in Werner (1997), McBrien (2006).

Kyrgyz brides, but for Russian brides who are unfamiliar with Kyrgyz customs and have different expectations of married life it is a particularly demanding trial.<sup>28</sup> The difficulties were cited in the stories of several Russian women who had married Kyrgyz husbands. One of them referred to it as having been “treated like a slave,” after which she had returned to her parents and the marriage was broken off.<sup>29</sup> But when successful, it was through these mechanisms of integration and encapsulation that the Russian bride was turned into a proper daughter-in-law, thereby restoring a temporarily breached boundary.

Lena’s encapsulation suggests a successful restoration of the boundary. Which is not to say that it was entirely secure. Ironically, while the encapsulation was successful not least because Lena had severed her ties with her biological (Russian) parents, Jenish tried to convince Lena that her biological mother should move in with them to help in the household. Jenish was asserting the importance of kinship and the role of blood-relatedness in Kyrgyz views of sociality, but in doing so he potentially destabilized the boundary. Lena’s refusal to give into this pressure— “he doesn’t know what he is talking about” —had ended the matter at least temporarily, but it demonstrated the absence-presence of the boundary, in the sense that boundaries may dissipate to then unexpectedly reassert themselves again.

### *Reconfiguration*

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<sup>28</sup> See Turaeva (2017) for a general discussion of the role of *kelin* in Central Asia and Ismailbekova (2014: 377-379) for a concise discussion of the *kelin* within the “typical” Kyrgyz marriage.

<sup>29</sup> We documented two instances in which the Russian bride terminated the marriage in the first months. This was a relatively straightforward procedure because these marriages had not been officially registered and in contrast to marriages between Kyrgyz had not been accompanied by an extensive exchange of gifts between the families.

Our first encounter with Bakyt lasted for no longer than ten minutes. We sat down in front of his house for a conversation and told him of our interest in mixed marriages. When we asked about his own marriage to Olga, a Russian, he replied: “So what?” Why would nationality even be an issue?” His rhetorical combativeness conveyed awareness of the sensitivities involved, while claiming that ethnicity or nationality should not matter. The response fitted Bakyt’s appearance. His beard and white hat (*dopo*) indicated involvement with the conservative Islamic piety movement Tablighi Jamaat, which has been active in the region since the late 1990s and professes that faith supersedes ethnic and national differences (Pelkmans 2017: 102-09). Bakyt explained that he had joined the movement after his first (and Kyrgyz) wife had died five years previously. The Tablighi Jamaat had become the gravitational center of his social life, and he gave the impression that he shared this commitment with Olga, who had converted to Islam.

If the previous two sub-sections demonstrated how marginalization and encapsulation counteracted the transgressive effects of mixed marriages, here we see a different logic at work. From Bakyt’s point of view, religious commitment and purpose rendered issues related to ethnicity and culture irrelevant. His answers suggested that he and Olga had transcended this ethnic logic and had inserted themselves into a faith-based network. This seemingly clear example of reconfiguration turned out less straightforward when it transpired that Olga held a different view on the matter. Meeting Olga separately, she said that she was “not very religious,” and spoke frankly about the difficulties of reconciling the religious and ethnic differences of their extended families. The discrepancy between the perspectives of Olga and Bakyt suggested that ideas of cultural difference can be tenacious even in the face of religious renewal that dismisses them as irrelevant.

Bakyt and Olga's marriage was not the only one that challenged the ethnic logic. One other mixed marriage suggested the possibility of transcending ethnic distinctions through religious renewal, though this time pointing in a protestant Christian direction. Margarita's parents had lived in Grigorievka for over forty years. They had considered themselves Orthodox Christian, even though their involvement in religious activities had been minimal, as was true for most local Russians in Soviet times. But when protestant churches became active in the region in the 1990s, Margarita's parents joined the Baptist Church. Margarita, born in 1990, grew up in this faith-based community, so when she entered university in the provincial city of Tokmak she joined the local Baptist Church, which is where she met Maksat. His parents were both Kyrgyz, but his father had died when Maksat was still very young. His mother had raised him by herself, removed from direct relatives, in Tokmak, where she had converted to Christianity.

Maksat said that he had initially resisted his attraction to Margarita, had prayed regularly for guidance in these matters, but had then understood that God was directing him towards Margarita. She had been skeptical when he proposed: "I had not expected it, and I was also afraid to marry a Kyrgyz." Margarita was especially worried about her parent's response, but when she finally broke the news she was relieved that contrary to her expectations, "father told me that I am the one who has to live my life, not he." The Baptist congregation similarly approved of the marriage, but it had provoked criticism from others. Margarita's friends from school warned her about the difficulties of being a "daughter-in-law" (*kelin*) in a Kyrgyz family, while her parents were repeatedly asked, in accusatory fashion: "how could you give your daughter to a Kyrgyz!?" On the Kyrgyz side, the techniques of othering conveyed pity and intrigue. Elderly female relatives had asked Maksat's mother with thinly veiled

pity: “how is it, having a Russian daughter-in-law?” which expressed worry about compatibility with proper household arrangements. Maksat himself remembered that several of his cousins had asked him, “so, how is it?” (*nu kak?*), a question that was tinged with curiosity about the unknown.

However, all of this was mostly background noise. In their five years of matrimony the couple had visited Maksat’s paternal village only once, which made it easy for Maksat to laugh off any potential negative views of Margarita’s domestic qualities: “I didn’t marry her to serve them tea, you know,” he joked. Moreover, as they had both recently taken up jobs in Magadan (north-eastern Siberia) their lives were becoming increasingly detached from extended kinship networks, and were grafted instead onto their closest relatives and the church in Magadan and Grigorievka,<sup>30</sup> whose mixed congregations were wholly accepting of their union. As Margarita’s father expressed it: “For us [believers] nations do not exist; everyone is equal in God’s eyes.”

These two cases suggest detachment from an ethnically patterned social fabric, and concomitant attachment to (transnational) faith-based networks. They show how new modes of religiosity in Kyrgyzstan may affect the ethnic boundary, not so much by building bridges between Kyrgyz and Russians as by making distinctions between them obsolete. Partly because of this, religious movements such as the Baptists and the Tablighi Jamaat tend to be depicted as extreme and fanatical, and as a threat to the cultural integrity of the Kyrgyz nation. These negative views are inescapable in the village context and hence it was unsurprising that Bakyt and Olga were stuck between two different perspectives on ethnicity and religion. Maksat and Margarita were

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<sup>30</sup> Maksat’s mother had moved in with the couple in Magadan, and the couple had spent the summer months in Grigorievka, living with Margarita’s parents.

arguably more successful in distancing themselves from the logic of ethnic difference, but this was predicated on their own increasing detachment from village life.

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Taken together, the marriage narratives have suggested different ways in which boundaries are maintained or restored through mixed marriages. The violation of order could be neutralized either by encapsulating the “alien element,” or by marginalizing the married couple. Thus, while Lena was reclassified as an honorary Kyrgyz, the marital bond between Aigul and Igor was marginalized by presenting it as unusual and extreme. Importantly, there are two sides to the process of marginalization. Aigul and Igor had internalized the dominant discourse that saw such bonds as problematic: Aigul reproduced it by lamenting about her predicament, and Igor played up his Kyrgyz kinship connection to soften the tension. By contrast, the attempted marginalization of Maksat and Margarita took on a different quality because they themselves rejected the classificatory scheme, insisting that rather than being transgressive, their marriage had been in line with God’s plan.

One reason for why it is productive to conceptualize boundaries as lines and gaps is that these dimensions are constantly in the process of emergence and dissipation. When Aigul moved in with Igor, she already anticipated the negative repercussions that her controversial (even if hardly voluntary) decision would have—by crossing a line, a gap in the social network emerged. When Lena consented to marriage, she submitted not just to the authority of their mother-in-law but to a process of encapsulation by which the boundary (violated by the marital act) was being restored. Mixed marriages signify transgressive moves across lines and gaps, which in doing so trigger a multiplicity of reactions. These reactions may amplify the disruptive effect for the marital couple while dampening the damage to the wider

fabric; they may work to encapsulate the transgressive element; or they may start to produce reverberations that will potentially transform the entire figuration, such as when religious and cultural vectors are being rearranged.

#### **4. The Emergent Qualities of Boundaries**

“I never thought of us as different, we didn’t grow up that way,” Marina mentioned when reflecting on the beginnings of her relationship with Azat. They were both “from respected families, hard-working and cultured,” and had finished school and secondary education in the late 1970s. Moreover, Marina, added, “back then we were all Soviet people; we didn’t talk about nationality.” These statements should perhaps not be taken too literal, but they are nonetheless insightful. They reflect the idea that the established Kyrgyz and Russians in Mikhailovka shared more with each other than with outsiders, be they Russians in Russia or Kyrgyz in more peripheral settings. They also underscored the point that difference was usually downplayed in ordinary interactions between Kyrgyz and Russians. But this seeming absence hid its latent presence. As seen in the previous sections, naturalized boundaries remain unmarked as long as they are not transgressed. Their features are actualized in processes of social and cognitive engagement, meaning that the lines and gaps may emerge or become apparent only after crossing.

This principle certainly applied to the story of Azat and Marina, the contours of which we sketched in the introduction. Although they had regularly interacted with people across the boundary, these interactions had mostly followed the norm. Significantly, their first marriages had been with people from their own ethnic



group.<sup>31</sup> Even when in the aftermath of these marriages Azat and Marina struck up a relationship, many of the obstacles remained initially unmarked. They were still living in their separate houses and kept their increasingly regular visits semi-secret. But with time it became painfully clear that this state of affairs represented the limit of the permissible. Marina refused to move in with Azat unless they were officially married, while Azat was reluctant to marry because of his family's disapproval. The stand-off reached a climax when Azat's relatives tried to force his hand by proposing he remarried to a Kyrgyz woman. On two separate occasions they brought a prospective bride to his house at night, but the following morning the women were gone.

Marina never mentioned these awkward episodes,<sup>32</sup> and yet she seemed to acknowledge them when telling us: "I came to see how difficult it was for Azat, so I made every effort to make it work for him." It was a carefully managed process, which among other things required that Azat reregistered the family apartment in Bishkek in his son's name, thereby ensuring his financial independence. In this process of active engagement obstacles emerged while the network contracted, requiring careful maneuvering to make the marriage possible.

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According to Marina, she had been fully accepted by her in-laws after their marriage in 2005: "My mother-in-law, she loved me. She would always comment on how well I did things." Marina certainly put effort into being integrated. She was considered a good *kelin*, meaning that amongst other things she was skilled at cooking Kyrgyz

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<sup>31</sup> Marina's first marriage had lasted for three years, after which she moved back in with her mother. Azat's first marriage had lasted for ten years, but during the last four years his wife had lived semi-separately in Bishkek.

<sup>32</sup> Two of Azat's relatives told us about these episodes in some detail.

food, knew how to serve guests, wore appropriate clothing, and bowed before older in-laws. Her efforts at becoming a proper Kyrgyz woman, wife, and daughter-in-law were recognized and acknowledged. Azat, for example, appreciated her support and loyalty: “When I was with Azat in public he would be the master (*khozain*) and I would be on the side. He liked that about me.” And with pride she mentioned how Kyrgyz children would not think of her as a Russian woman, and were confused when it was pointed out to them. Not all of Marina’s adaptive efforts were successful. Language especially proved difficult. She understood most conversations, but ran into a psychological barrier when speaking Kyrgyz: “it is probably because I am afraid to say something wrong.”

The relevant point here is that Marina’s efforts were geared towards respecting the differences between Kyrgyz and Russians. Through her deliberate adjustments she presented herself as an exception that bridged but also re-inscribed the boundary. Moreover, while Marina made a conscious effort to integrate into the Kyrgyz network, this integration did not extend to the families at larger, as became clear in the months after Azat unexpectedly died in early 2015.

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“Only seven months have passed, and it is as if nothing ever existed! If they don’t want to deal with me—fine! —but it is the boy that I feel sorry about.” While living in Marina’s house in the summer of 2015, we repeatedly witnessed how tensions with her in-laws erupted, often over the phone. One particularly disturbing issue concerned the claims of Azat’s oldest son. He had already appropriated the car, but he still felt that he had been wronged: “Mind you, this is the son who we registered the apartment [in Bishkek] to, and still he makes claims (*pretenduiet*) to *this* house. As if I did all this just to live in this house!” Conflict about inheritance can surely divide any family,

but it appeared to emerge particularly fast and vicious because Marina was not Kyrgyz and because the extended families had never become integrated. In Marina's words, "For ten years we were married, living together [in the same street], sharing everything. We have a son! And even so they say, 'you are a swindler (*aferistka*).'"

The marriage ended with the death of Azat and thus, logically, it seized to exist as a boundary object. Marina was rejected and, in a conflictual process, property was divided. However, their son Timur was still there. As a *metis* of mixed Kyrgyz – Russian descent, he was an anomaly, a hybrid, now of a problematic kind. His older (half) brother had told Marina: "Timur is not a brother to me; not as long as *you* are alive. Maybe after, maybe when he is forty, then I will be his brother." Timur's uncles (his father's brothers) were hardly more supportive. Sure, he was allowed to play in their yard, but even before Marina had asked them, they had made it clear that they would not be contributing to Timur's education. The issue was pertinent in 2016, when Timur succeeded to be accepted in the selective and prestigious but also very expensive Turkish Lyceum in nearby Karakol. Marina nevertheless decided to send him there, not just for educational reasons, but also because she felt it would allow Timur to find his place in life:

I want Timur to be a real Muslim. I told him to learn *namaz* [Islamic prayer].

You know, Russians will never accept him as one of their own. Sure, my close relatives [*moi blizskii*] call him "our Timur." But no. It is because of Islam. So, it is better that he becomes a real Kyrgyz.

Was it because of her own disillusioning boundary-crossing experiences, that she thought that her *metis* son—a boundary object of sorts—would not be able to navigate the boundary successfully?

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Reflecting on the messy aftermath of the marriage it could be argued that the marital possessions and son Timur were *hybrids*, the product of connecting networks (Strathern 1996). As long as husband and wife were both alive, the node in the network was a productive binding (cf. Ingold 2008), but with the death of the husband the network was cut to redirect flows and resources and restore the integrity of the configuration. What stood out in this discussion is how features of the boundary emerged in processes of engagement. The obstacles standing in the way of a mixed marriage only fully transpired when Marina and Azat had already started their relationship. By adjusting her behavior Marina not only bridged the boundary but also acknowledged and thus re-inscribed it. Her decision to send Timur to a Turkish school recreated the boundary in an unanticipated manner. It showed that while transgressive acts erase lines of distinction they simultaneously create incentives for reasserting such lines. Boundaries are continuously being reconfigured and reproduced in processes of social and cognitive engagement.

## **5. Stuffy Boundaries**

This contribution has demonstrated the potential of returning to the perhaps “stuffy” topic of ethnic boundaries, by suggesting that a focus on the experiential reality of boundaries produces new insight. Half a century ago Barth (1969) importantly claimed that instead of seeing boundaries as epiphenomenal to cultural stuff, they were generative of that very stuff. Acknowledging the importance of this perspective,

we additionally claimed that it left the boundary itself unexamined, thus failing to capture the generative interlocking of “boundaries” and “stuff,” and hence the experiential and emergent dimensions of boundaries.

The boundary stuff that we examined was not necessarily material or even always tangible. Boundaries, similar to what Ingold suggests about places, “do not so much exist as occur” (2008: 1808). Although the Kyrgyz – Russian boundary was grafted onto naturalized differences, its phenomenal reality emerged in processes of social and cognitive engagement. As long as the differences remained unquestioned the boundary was virtually imperceptible to the involved; conversely, the boundary was particularly felt in transgressive moments, when its features were simultaneously at display and at risk. We used the notion of “absence presence” to analyze the implied dynamic relationship, a relationship in which links are not fixed and presence and absence are not opposed to each other (cf. Callon and Law 2004: 3-9). Numerous elements had accreted over time to constitute the boundary, but its relevance, figuration, and position was never predetermined.

Transgressive mixed marriages showed these dynamics in telling detail. By challenging the social fabric, these marriages provoked restorative acts. The restorative techniques aimed to neutralize the transgression by either encapsulating the transgressor such as when Russian brides were rendered Kyrgyz, or by marginalizing the transgressors, such as when mixed couples were depicted as abnormal or when connections with them were severed. The transgressors assisted this restoration by internalizing their marginalization or by conforming to the codes of conduct of the group they married into. In some instances, however, the transgressors rejected the premises of the debate, aspiring to a religious mode of sociality that transcended ethnic boundaries. Moreover, efforts to encapsulate the alien element

could end up destabilizing the boundary by producing new hybrids in the form of children, or by extending the encapsulation to include mothers-in-law.

In light of the above we suggest that it is too simplistic to say that boundaries structure life; rather, boundaries are created in the flow of life, and these actualizations influence its broader currents. It is in these processes of engagement that people discover and actualize ethnic differences, and potentially transcend them. To talk about the stuff of boundaries is to talk about the affects and intensities that infuse people's milieu (Deleuze 1998: 61), particularly so in heterogeneous environments. These processes resist straightforward modelling, but are intensely experienced by those living the boundary, who intimately sense the phenomenally real stuff of boundaries.

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